

Words and Memories

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Words are tricky things, especially in print where the reader cannot know the writer's imagined inflection. Is he being sincere or sardonic? A little bit of both, perhaps, thinking of death and dying, interactions and interludes. As much as we in the United States might like to control our time on earth through prayer or health care, there remains no way around it. Whereas we learn implicitly that everything is controllable, that is, that someone is always liable and that there are no accidents, death is the fly in the ointment. The best we can do is howl "Not yet." We are helpless and, faced with dead certainty, hopeless. Dealing with hopelessness is the most excruciating aspect of grief I can imagine.

My father hated geraniums. As far as I know, there was nothing about geraniums that he found in any way pleasing, not the smell nor the sight. About four years after he died something happened to make my mother mad. It might have been something at work. It may have been simply a recurrent surge of anger that he was dead at all. She bought two pots of geraniums and plopped them on his grave. It made her feel much better. Such callous disregard for a such a petty dislike of my father's was a good way to get back at a dead man.

I know that trends grow in cycles, longer and shorter. I know that—taking the perspective that nothing is ever completely static—our culture's pre-occupation with not talking about death is something that is undergoing its own shift. It seems like there are concentric circles around the topic that are ever more uncomfortable to discuss. My mother and the geraniums are on the outer ring. After all, my father is 17 years dead and the story is 13 years old. It is distanced. Stories about my father that take place when he was alive, cheating in a friendly way at volleyball or teasing me or my siblings, are on the outer ring. Walking to the gravesite, talking about the moment of death when his face went gray, those are private things. Most people don't want to know about it or be a part of it. People do not want to hear about how he died and how we could only watch. That's at the center. It's an exaggeration to say that people don't talk about death. It's not an exaggeration to say that people get uncomfortable, if they know the circumstances, when the subject of my father or brother, my uncle, aunt, or friend comes up.

It's unpleasant.

But the memories are not unpleasant, not even the memory of picking up the phone to hear someone telling me that they were turning Jen's life support off, or returning from a sleepover to have my parents tell me that Karl wouldn't be coming home ever again. Those memories are oddly precious, hardly unpleasant, hardly difficult to discuss. We—some of us—cherish them. Death becomes less a topic to be avoided than a cause to be addressed. Cause and effect: death as dying and death as cessation. I admit to less fascination with the subject than to stubbornness. Either way, though, it amounts to something of a fixation.

I relate to the subject in different ways and on different levels. I take advantage of opportunities to talk about and to think through a subject that in the United States is more often avoided than addressed. At times it seems that "callous disregard" is invoked as a means of not talking about death: please, have respect for the deceased. Yet I can think of nothing more callous in that regard than silence, and nothing more affirming than to play Jen's blues records far too loud, to tie a knot around Karl's tree in Duke Memorial Forest, or to cheat at volleyball. We are alive, after all, and we have speech, and our memories are worth the sharing of a pot of geraniums. If we are hopeless to alter the course of life and death, then the memories are all that remain. They comfort and sting in equal measure, afflicted with their own sardonicity and sincerity. That's the problem with memories and words. Hopelessness is not their problem and that is why they have their own lives, independent and vibrant, if tinged with grief.